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Editors' Note

Religion in the Age of Social Distancing: How COVID-19 Presents New Directions for Research

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In this brief note written during a global pandemic, we consider some of the important ways this historical moment is altering the religious landscape, aiming our investigative lens at how religious institutions, congregations, and individuals are affected by the social changes produced by COVID-19. This unprecedented time prompts scholars of religion to reflect on how to strategically approach the study of religion in the time of "social distancing," as well as moving forward. Particularly important considerations include developing heuristic, innovative approaches for revealing ongoing changes to religion, as well as how religion continues to structure social life across a wide range of contexts, from the most intimate and personal to the most public and global. Although our note can only be indicative rather than exhaustive, we do suggest that the initial groundwork for reconsiderations might productively focus on several key analytical themes, including: Epidemiology, Ideology, Religious Practice, Religious Organizations and Institutions, as well as Epistemology and Methodology. In offering these considerations as a starting point, we remain aware (and hopeful) that inventive and unanticipated approaches will also emerge.

Key words: COVID-19; social distancing; religion; research methods; social theory.

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As we write this, the world remains mired in a global pandemic, with the rates of infection from a novel coronavirus continuing to rise. COVID-19 is still a new and inadequately understood upper respiratory infectious disease, with a rate of mortality that is high enough to have killed over 500,000 people to date globally. With delays in testing in some locations and insufficient knowledge, official estimates are still being corrected; nevertheless, the spike of known infections in March of 2020 moved national governments around the world to close businesses, places of worship, and schools—essentially, any arena where people gathered in substantial numbers. By the end of April, the United States alone had reported over one million cases of COVID-19, and by the end of May, amidst the accumulation of infections, mortality in the United States reached a grim milestone of 100,000 deaths. By the time this paper is published, infections and deaths in the United States and elsewhere will not just be higher. They will be *significantly* higher.

In this brief note, we consider some of the ways that the global pandemic is altering the religious landscape, aiming our investigative lens to how religious institutions, congregations, and individuals are responding to the social changes wrought by COVID-19. Where should our analytical attention be focused?

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the related public health measures taken to mitigate the spread of the disease, and the varied public responses to the virus have far-reaching social implications. Religious institutions, communities, practices, beliefs, and identities present a particularly rich area for social scientific study, especially given the centrality of face-to-face and intimate gatherings typically associated with nearly all religious practices and traditions. Further, the death and mourning wrought by a pandemic would typically result in an increase in face-to-face gatherings and religious rituals; but given the need for social distancing and the necessity of adapting interaction to these constraints, the pandemic is triggering an increased need for religious traditions while at the same time significantly altering the expressions of those traditions. How religious institutions manage death and mourning—two of the social moments religious leaders and institutions are most central to during normal times—is a strategic location for viewing some of the ongoing changes to religion. In this we can see how the "demand" for religious ritual, comfort, and support is presumably increased by the pandemic, while simultaneously the "available supply" of religion (in the form it is expected) is drastically decreased. So too the changes to levels of existential risk and the associated patterns of social engagement brought about by the pandemic offer social scientists numerous opportunities to explore important theoretical and practical questions regarding how conditions of change and uncertainty relate to private religious beliefs and practices.

While the health risks of debilitation and death draw immediate attention, controversy rages on about how to handle the threat of COVID-19. Among the most basic points of dispute is the economy. The segregation of health issues into doctors' offices and hospitals, the relative isolation of severe illnesses, and the fact that the majority of people are either asymptomatic or as yet unaffected by the

virus have prompted much attention on the economic impact of local, state, and federal governmental responses to the pandemic. For months, the slowing of the economy due to the sanctions on in-person gatherings and mandates to shelter-in-place has resulted in millions of people being financially affected by closings, furloughs, and layoffs, with sharp increases in unemployment. Immense pressure exists to "re-open the economy" out of a desperation to keep businesses running and to re-hire workers, with the use of "phases" to indicate the types of activities that could result (i.e., 1: bare essentials of food, health, and utilities; 2: limits on room capacity and enforced social distancing; 3: continued sanitization and expansion of social boundaries). The wearing of masks has been strongly encouraged, although selectively enforced and inconsistently modeled by political leaders. And mainstream news and various social media sources often add to polarization and obfuscation about re-opening the economy, resulting in decidedly split judgments on which experts are valid, which solutions are viable, and which practices are needed to address the pandemic. Likewise, calls to re-open the economy have been interwoven with demands to re-open churches, and restrictions on in-person gatherings that have limited religious services have been opposed as limiting "essential" social services, and hence as an infringement of religious liberty.

The pandemic raises a number of important analytical considerations for researchers, from intra-individual and interactive, to larger organizational and cross-national implications. At a minimum, religion scholars will want to pay attention to how religious professionals have altered their leadership to accommodate social distancing, switching to a largely remote working environment. While the social spaces of many congregational leaders are shrinking considerably, other religious professionals have been called upon to play expanded roles. For instance, chaplains "usually do [their] work quietly, around the margins. But with the pandemic, their work has moved to the center of the American religious experience" (Cadge 2020). However, perhaps a broader re-imagining is possible in this moment. Just as the circumstances surrounding the pandemic have caused many people to rethink such systemic issues as racial inequality, health care provision, and the role of education in a thriving society, the mandated "pause" might allow religion scholars the time and space to more thoroughly revamp the study of religion in the twenty-first century, and to develop innovative approaches to understanding how religion continues to shape people's lives (see figure 1).

RELIGION AS AN "INDEPENDENT VARIABLE"

One critical way religious institutions and individuals will be central to analyses of the pandemic is as an "independent variable" (Smilde and May 2015), including as a vector of disease transmission (Conger et al. 2020). Multiple instances have been documented of religious gatherings operating as "superspreading events," including cases in Washington (Hamner et al. 2020), Oregon (Cline 2020), California (Bizjak et al. 2020), Arkansas (James et al.

2020), and West Virginia (Nazaryan 2020) in the U.S. Religious gatherings have also been identified as important sites of virus transmission in Germany (Boston 2020) and South Korea (Shin et al. 2020). While most congregations followed state orders to close, some resisted such orders, staying open and risking arrest. Still others innovated by developing "drive-in" church services that likely still posed some dangers to the health of attendees.

The centrality of intensive interactive rituals for producing the communal benefits of religion (e.g., social support, emotional catharsis, perceived healing) ensures that there will be persistent tension between many religious groups' desire for in-person gatherings and the social distancing requirements necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19. To the extent that religious individuals and their related groups believe in-person collective experiences are essential to their religiosity, social identity, and well-being, they may continue in-person gathering to the limits of (or even beyond) social distancing policies. At the same time, social connections among members within congregations may lead to the urging of doctor visits, care for symptoms as they emerge, and practical assistance for medical bills, making congregational participation a potentially important factor in treating and overcoming disease (see Benjamins et al. 2011).

A central consideration on this topic is the extent to which different religious traditions and worldviews emphasize particular orientations, such as individualistic versus collectivist orientations, care for the vulnerable, and neoliberal economics. Sorting out the different ways that religion relates to the spread of disease and care for the sick stands as an opportunity for researchers in the field of religion and health to contribute to the wider body of knowledge about the pandemic. Although religion is never truly an "independent variable" because of its historical and ongoing relationship to other facets of social life, particularly race/ethnicity, social class, and gender (Wilde 2018), it is nonetheless critical to investigate and document how religion influences behavioral patterns that are directly related to disease transmission and mitigation. Likewise, in the case of the United States, the reciprocal and intensifying relationship between religion and partisanship ensures that (Margolis 2018), to the extent that public policies and actions toward COVID-19 are politicized, religion is a critical consideration for a full understanding of social distancing actions (or inactions).

RELIGION AS SHARED AND CONTESTED BELIEFS

Religion will also likely be assessed as a complex system of beliefs that are shared and contested. A key consideration here is religion and science, for which a number of issues are immediately notable for both quantitative and qualitative study. Central among these are whether and how religious identity, beliefs, and practices relate to behaviors undertaken (or avoided) in response to social distancing requirements, such as avoiding gatherings, vaccine hesitancy, or wearing face masks, to name but a few. For example, wearing masks has become

FIGURE 1. Topics for Researchers of Religion to Consider in Relation to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Topics for Researchers of Religion to Consider in Relation to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Epidemiological

- Religious gatherings and rituals in relation to disease transmission
- Religious beliefs and identities in relation to social distancing and disease mitigation behaviors
- Religious practices, beliefs, and identities in relation to medical behaviors

Ideological

- Existential insecurity in relation to religiosity
- Religion and views of science
- Religion, economic ideology, and support for re-opening policies
- Applications of theodicy to increased suffering and death
- Conspiracy theories about the pandemic

Religious Practice

- Privatization of religiosity and secularization
- Asynchronous religious rituals
- Technologically-mediated religious innovation and distribution
- Civic engagement through and beyond religious organizations

Religious Organizations and Institutions

- Changes to professional religious roles
- Conflicts over religion, politics, and law

Epistemological and Methodological

- Application of virtual qualitative methods
- Shifting theoretical focus toward lived religion

a strong point of contention, with some insisting that masks are ineffective and unnecessary (as long as one has enough faith and courage). Those who refuse to wear masks include many who believe mask wearing bows to the dictate of "the State," and therefore restricts a person's God-given freedom. Coupled with this, many believe that mask wearing bows to the dictates of science, which is viewed as unreliable, especially in contrast to the strength of one's own spiritual devotion for providing unseen, and therefore miraculous, protection.

Already, there is evidence emerging that religious views are consequentially connected to following (or ignoring) such social distancing practices (Hill et al., Forthcoming; Perry et al., Forthcoming). Notably, these patterns fall along distinctively gendered lines in relation to religion (Smothers et al., Forthcoming). At least four dimensions of religiosity are worth exploring in regard to their connection to social distancing behaviors: (1) certainty of beliefs, (2) perceptions of invulnerability, (3) collectivist versus individualist orientations, and (4) the centrality and intensity

of collective rituals. Certainty and exclusivity of an ideological framework can relate to the distrust of authority from other institutions, such as science or medicine (Baker et al. 2020). An important contextual consideration is the extent to which these aspects of religion are connected to social dynamics of race (see Yukich and Edgell 2020), and how the differential racial impact of the pandemic may therefore be connected to religiosity in ways that differ along racial and ethnic lines. Another important contextual consideration, at least in the United States., is the increasing politicization about views about science and religion (O'Brien and Noy, Forthcoming).

Further, public opinion about the pandemic and social policies for mitigation cannot be fully understood without consideration of multiple aspects of religiosity and worldview.[1] Approaching religion in the pandemic from a different angle, the responses of clergy and religious elites to the hardship of the pandemic provide ample opportunity for systematic studies of multiple dimensions of ideology, including theodicy, the relation of particular religious traditions to scientific authority, and in some cases claims and experiences of miraculous healing. The analysis of official rhetoric and communications offers an opportunity to look at how representatives of different traditions frame suffering and death in the face of widespread injustice and tragedy. In the sense that theodicy provides a crucial window into the larger ideology of traditions (Berger 1967), comparative and in-depth qualitative analyses hold much promise for revealing important connections between religious groups, their practices and experiences, and their larger cultural environments.

Beyond religious elites, popular assessments of rumors about what is true also warrant focused attention from researchers. Weber's ((1922) 1993) interest in different forms of authority, including charismatic authority, places questions about the social construction of "truth" squarely in the realm of sociology of religion. Religion scholars might, for example, examine the proliferation, consumption, and spread of conspiracy theories about the pandemic. Although not necessarily related to formal religion (although sometimes they are), conspiracy theories contain a number of quasi-religious elements (Bader et al. 2020; Robertson 2016), and social scientists studying religion can assist with evaluating the relative diffusion, as well as the patterns and consequences, of conspiracy theories. Conspiratorial beliefs about the pandemic have already been spliced into existing conspiracy subcultures, such as the ones spun by Alex Jones or the anonymous online denizens of QAnon (Frenkel et al. 2020). Importantly, acceptance of conspiracy theories has consequences for political behavior (Oliver and Wood 2014a), health behaviors such as vaccine resistance (Oliver and Wood 2014b), and general social well-being, including trust in other people and the purchasing of firearms out of fear (Bader et al. 2020). Scholars of religion should not overlook this aspect of the pandemic, but rather contribute positively to this area of research.

[1]It is worth noting that secularity will also be related to social distancing attitudes and behaviors, and should be studied accordingly. We are focusing here on aspects of religion, but secular attitudes and identities should be considered from a similar perspective.

RELIGION AS ORGANIZING AND INSTITUTIONALIZED PRACTICE

Religion will also continue to be analyzed as a set of emerging and established practices (Ammerman 2020; Wuthnow 2020). Thinking about religion as the object of analysis and its role in disease transmission, a clear and consequential way that the pandemic has changed religion is the suspension of in-person religious gatherings, and the corresponding need to engage in "socially distanced" forms of interactive religious services and rituals. Religious groups have used a wide range of technological innovations to fill the void left by in-person gatherings, from teleconferenced Seders to drive-in church services broadcast on radio stations, and increasingly in video chat memorial services. How long such mediated substitutions are necessary for interactive rituals remains an open question depending on groups' locations, orientations toward social distancing measures, and congregants' levels of fear and reticence about interactions in public spaces. Even when congregations do return to face-to-face gatherings, there may be changes to interaction rituals, particularly those involving physical contact, singing, and ingestion. Five possible implications of these changes can be seen in: (1) the privatization of religiosity; (2) asynchronous consumption of and participation in religious services; (3) a shifting of conditions in the religious environment to favor groups that are already technologically advanced and adequately staffed to facilitate technologically-mediated religious innovation and distribution; (4) religious organizations and their civic engagement with the local community; and (5) conflicts between religious groups and local, state, and federal governments regarding social gatherings.

The Privatization of Religiosity and Secularization

A notable consequence of the pandemic may be further advancing the pre-existing processes toward the privatization of religiosity (e.g., Chaves 2017; Houtman and Aupers 2007). Even for those continuing to participate in their religious communities remotely via mediated interaction, a qualitative shift toward the privatization of religious practice necessarily occurs. The long-term consequences of these shifts will depend on the extent and length of social distancing requirements, as well as whether and how people reintegrate physical co-presence within religious communities after social distancing requirements are reduced. While we can reasonably expect an acceleration of pre-existing trends toward religious privatization as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the degree and expressions of this privatization remain to be seen and documented. The pandemic may also accelerate trends associated with secularization. To the extent that religious participation is habit based and interrupted by social distancing, it may facilitate the exit of some from active religious participation. So rather than a V-shaped pattern in religious participation after the easing of social distancing, returns to religious practice may well not reach their pre-pandemic levels. Undoubtedly, some of this will be a transition to the privatization of religion, but some will also likely simply be declining levels of

religiosity. Generating adequate measures to map the extent of privatization versus secularization will be a key consideration for researchers.

Asynchronous Religious Rituals

A related consequence is the increasing production and consumption of religious services and rituals via asynchronous communication. A primary example of this trend is the vast reduction of the annual hajj to Mecca in 2020, the first time this Pillar of Islam has been curtailed since the mid-1800s (Hubbard and Walsh 2020). More generally, by removing the physical co-presence of group services, music, and rites, a foundational element of the positive affect produced by efficacious interactive rituals is removed (Collins 2005). In essence, the Durkheim ((1912) 1995) pathway to collective effervescence is substantially and negatively altered. While not all emotion is removed, an important shift has taken place that removes groups' abilities to generate shared rhythm and mood (on the positive side of generating group cohesion), and severely reduces or removes groups' abilities to police participation and norms (on the negative side of the social dynamics that create group cohesion) (see Draper 2019; Wellman et al. 2020). So, while individuals may passively consume religious interactions or individually engage in rites and sacraments, the longer-term aspects of group cohesion and the accompanying social identities it generates are imperiled. Beyond the experience of worship itself, the ability to mobilize and recruit volunteers for the practical needs of religiously motivated ministries, as well as generating financial contributions, are also challenged when members are deprived of the opportunity to interact face-to-face. Encouraging use of digital platforms for charitable giving will also become much more important. Notably, this places particular challenges on poorer individuals and religious congregations, where members' access to electronic forms of capital transfer may be limited. As charitable giving is re-directed from in-person to remote, organizations with a larger cache of financial resources have considerable advantages for long-term survival and success by virtue of their ability to weather potential downturns in financial giving, although the challenge of fundraising is a constant concern, even for seemingly stable organizations (Martí and Mulder 2020; Mulder and Martí 2020).

Technologically Mediated Religious Innovation and Distribution

Related to the shift toward mediated communication for interactive rituals, groups and organizations that already emphasized the use of such technologies before the imposition of social distancing requirements have a clear competitive advantage for the maintenance of their organizations compared to groups who were more heavily reliant on face-to-face interactions. Streaming services, both live and recorded, have become more common recently, and many congregations had already invested in the equipment and personnel to provide access to their services remotely. Regarding communal rituals such as weddings, technology has been used to allow small in-person gatherings while providing remote participation for

broader networks of family and friends. Similarly, in relation to bereavement and death, online options have opened to conduct funeral services that allow involvement and interaction through video. Organizations' access to capital resources will affect their ability to upgrade communication technologies to substitute for face-to-face gatherings during periods of social distancing.

Religion and Civic Engagement

The pandemic also provides an opportunity to examine the role of religious organizations in social support for communities' members. For both the medical and economic hardships wrought by the pandemic and related social distancing measures, religious groups and individuals are playing important roles for formal and informal social support. For example, we know that religious congregations have been important sources of immediate assistance, from food pantries to supplemental funds to assist with costs associated with housing, medicine, and transportation. The changing landscape for religious nonprofits and local social service provisions organized through congregations are key domains for changes in the dynamics of formal social support. For informal social support, the provisions put in place by denominational organizations and local congregations to care for members during times of physical and financial hardship warrant explicit attention from researchers. Conversely, the limitations placed on faith-based organizing and political engagement by social distancing should also be carefully documented. For instance, in light of a surge of protests connected to the "Black Lives Matter" movement spurred on by the death of George Floyd on May 25th, 2020, there is evidence that the lull in congregational activity allowed logistical space for church leaders to redirect their energies toward mobilizing their ministries to participate in protests that publicly advocate against racial injustice. Thus, an intriguing and unintended consequence of closed church services may have been allowing for the expansion of community and civic engagement beyond sanctuaries (see Beyerlein and Ryan 2018).

Religion, Politics, and Law

Finally, at an institutional level, there are a number of opportunities for examining interesting and consequential issues involving the intersection of religion and law. Thousands of religious groups received forgivable loans of up to 10 million dollars through the Paycheck Protection Program, which was part of a 669-billion-dollar economic stimulus package; support that some groups have strongly criticized. The U.S. Roman Catholic Church alone gained at least $1.4 billion in this taxpayer-backed aid (and may have even exceeded $3.5 billion; see Dunklin and Rezendes 2020). Early reports also raised questions as to whether different religious groups were equally likely to receive support. The urge to re-start worship services given the pragmatic issues of accepting donations and the mobilization of volunteers for all sorts of ministries and services accomplished through the congregation have prompted aggressive calls for religious exemptions

for church gatherings. On one end, some churches have insisted on a drive-in church option to ensure proper distancing and provide access to services for those without the technological means to access services remotely. On the other end, most churches who insist on continuing to meet physically have stated their intent to sanitize sanctuaries, provide masks, and generously space seating. Some churches have sued their state governments, insisting that congregations are "essential businesses" and citing "religious liberty." Indeed, there appears to be a resonance between those who agitate for re-opening the churches and those who agitate for re-opening the economy—a Christian libertarian affinity that insists open churches and businesses are what is needed to keep America strong (see Martí 2020a, 2020b).

Whether and how religious organizations, groups, and individuals are restricted from particular practices in order to limit the spread of disease necessarily raises points of tension about the legal parameters of religious freedom. Accordingly, there will likely be waves of court cases across national, state, and local contexts dealing with issues related to social distancing and the rights of religious expression. Some of these issues have already been taken up by high courts, such as the *South Bay United Pentecostal Church v. Newsom* (2020) case, where the Supreme Court of the United States denied injunctive relief to a church in California that did not want to follow social distancing restrictions on public gatherings. Soon after, churches in California filed suit in federal court challenging the Governor's ban on singing in houses of worship (*Calvary Chapel of Ukiah et al. v. Newsom et al.*). Many other similar cases will undoubtedly follow, and documenting how and why the legal boundaries surrounding religious freedom are remade in the ongoing and eventually post-pandemic landscape provides ample opportunity for meaningful study (see Bennett 2017; Wenger 2017).

EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A final consideration for social scientists studying religion during and after the COVID-19 pandemic concerns methodology, and to an extent, the broader epistemology undergirding the study of religion. Methodologically, many of the most vital tools available for studying religion, particularly those that are qualitative in orientation, are restricted by the need for social distancing. Ethnographic, observational, and interview methods are all severely constrained by the reduction of in-person gatherings and the limitations on face-to-face interaction. Of course, these are the precisely the methods that are needed to document the ongoing changes to structure and meaning of religion. Consequently, researchers must be innovative in their use of digital technologies for the application of qualitative analyses, including but not limited to the use of online archives, digital ethnography, and alternative interview formats. In addition, the use of unobtrusive measures may become especially important as we seek to examine materials without the ability to observe as much in situ (see Webb et al. 2000).

Beyond the need to be methodologically innovative and resourceful, the changes to the social contexts of religion that we have detailed above also raise important epistemological and theoretical considerations for the sociology of religion. As religious adherents' definitions of worship and ritual life undergo reconsideration and change, researchers should pursue these emerging epistemologies by creatively tracking them. Cutting-edge work in the field, such as the focus on "lived religion" (Ammerman 2014; McGuire 2008, 2016), has already raised many of these questions. Now, however, such considerations about the meaning of religion in the contemporary world—and how we should approach it as researchers and theorists—can no longer be ignored.

THE EMERGING RESEARCH AGENDA FOR STUDYING RELIGION AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Rather than being prescriptive, this note is intended as an encouragement to our colleagues. Given that COVID-19 emerged as a public health crisis only a few months ago, sociologists of religion are only beginning to grapple with the many unanticipated and unseen dynamics of this global phenomenon. These happenings were playing out as most social scientists were also moving their professional lives into quarantine, taking on new roles, getting trained in social distancing practices, and managing the radical uncertainty of their work and home lives. As the circumstances of the pandemic normalize, as acceptable risks and potential vaccines emerge, and as the ability to secure analytical focus returns, there is no doubt that clever, insightful, and not-yet-fully apparent means of analyzing and revealing profound structural patterns will emerge. Even as we are mournful of the suffering and tragedy the world continues to endure, we are hopeful that the creative and capable researchers who comprise our field will find ways to add their voices to the emergent understanding of how the world has changed in light of COVID-19, and perhaps better prepare us for the many unknowns of our collective future.

Our discussion here is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive, and no one can foresee all the ways that religion will influence and in turn be affected by the ongoing pandemic. We anticipate that the list of topics brought into new relief by the ongoing pandemic will grow ever-larger over time. Still, we hope the considerations we have outlined are the beginning of productive dialog in the field.

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